

TELLING REPORTERS ABOUT RISK

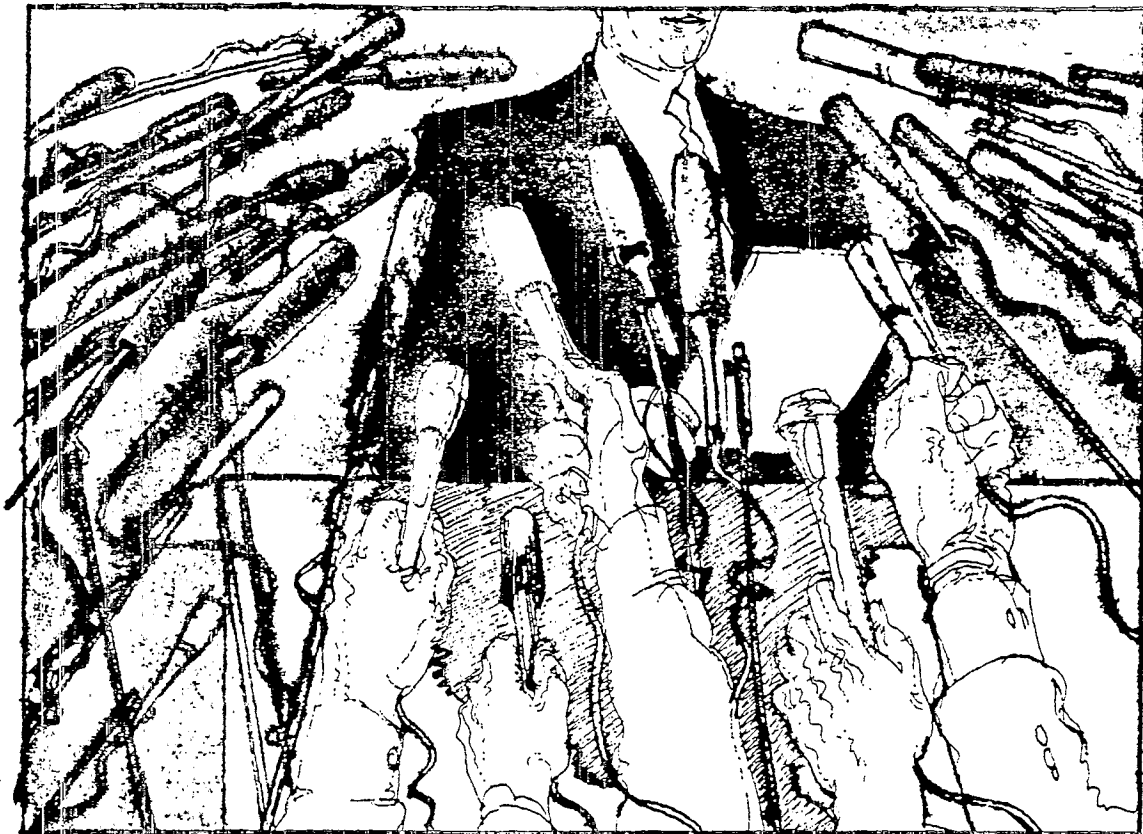
Dealing with reporters
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agreeable part
of the job.

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Although I hate to admit it, risk communication is a simpler field than risk assessment or risk management. It just isn't that hard to understand how journalists and nontechnical people think about risk. But it is crucial to understand. In fact not mastering the rudiments of risk communication has led a lot of smart people to make a lot of foolish choices.

Much depends on whether you think risk communication is a job that can safely be left to technicians—public relations staff, community affairs officers—or whether you believe it must become an integral part of risk management. My main goal is for environmental protection commissioners and plant managers to read what I have to say, not merely pass it along to the public relations office.

That temptation is almost overwhelming, I know. Dealing with the media seems in so many ways the least pleasant, least controllable, least *fair* part of a decision-maker's work. Most risk managers, I suspect, spend a good deal of time hoping the media will go away and



leave them to do their jobs in peace.

But since they won't, the next best thing is to understand better why they won't, how they are likely to react to what you have to say, and what you might want to say differently next time.

- *Environmental risk is not a big story*

The mass media are not especially interested in environmental risk. Reporters do care whether or not an environmental situation is risky; that's what makes it newsworthy. But once the possibility of hazard is established, the focus turns to other matters: how did the problem happen, who is responsible for cleaning it up, how much will it cost? Assessing the extent of the risk strikes most journalists as an academic exercise. The reporter's job is news, not education. And the news is the risky thing that has happened, not the difficult determination of how risky it actually is.

The typical news story on environmental risk touches on risk itself, while it dwells on more newsworthy matters. In 1985, newspaper editors in New Jersey were asked to submit examples of their best reporting on environmental risk, and the articles were analyzed paragraph by paragraph. Only 32% of the paragraphs dealt at all with risk. Nearly half of the risk paragraphs, moreover, focused on whether a substance assumed to be risky was or was not present, leaving only 17% of the paragraphs to deal directly with riskiness itself. In a parallel study, reporters were asked to specify which information they would need most urgently in covering an environmental risk emergency. Most reporters chose the basic risk information, saving the details for a possible second day story. What happened, how it happened, who's to blame and what the authorities are doing about it all command more journalistic attention than toxicity during an environmental crisis.

- *Politics is more newsworthy than science*

The media's reluctance to focus on risk for more than a paragraph or two might be less of problem if that paragraph or two were a careful summary of the scientific evidence. It seldom is. In fact, the media are especially disinclined to

cover the science of risk. Most of the paragraphs devoted to risk in the New Jersey study consisted of unsupported opinion—someone asserting or denying the risk without documentation. Only 4.2% of the paragraphs (24% of the risk paragraphs) took an intermediate or mixed or tentative position on the extent of risk. And only a handful of the articles told the readers what standard (if any) existed for the hazard in question, much less the status of research and technical debate surrounding the standard.

Trying to interest journalists in the abstract issues of environmental risk assessment is tough; abstract issues are not the meat of journalism. Yet the public needs to understand abstractions like the uncertainty of risk assessments, the impossibility of zero risk, the debatable assumptions underlying dose-response curves and animal tests. Where possible, it helps to embed some of these concepts in your comments on hot breaking stories.

- *Reporters cover viewpoints, not "truths"*

For science, objectivity is tentativeness and adherence to evidence in the search for truth. For journalism, objectivity is balance. In the epistemology of journalism, there is no truth (or at least no way to determine truth); there are only conflicting claims, to be covered as fairly as possible, thus tossing the hot potato of truth into the lap of the audience.

Imagine a scale from 0 to 10 of all possible positions on an issue. Typically, reporters give short shrift to 0, 1, 9 and 10; these views are too extreme to be credible. Reporters may also pay relatively little attention to 4, 5 and 6; these positions are too wishy-washy to make good copy. Most of the news, then, consists of 2's and 3's and 7's and 8's, in alternating paragraphs if the issue is hot, otherwise in separate stories as each side creates and dominates its own news events. Objectivity to the journalist thus means giving both sides their chance, and reporting accurately what they had to say. It does not mean filling in the uninteresting middle, and it certainly does not mean figuring out who is right.

If a risk story is developing and you have a perspective that you feel

has not been well covered, don't wait to be called—you won't be. Reporters are busy chasing after the sources they *have* to talk to, and listening to the sources who want to talk to them.

Rather than suffer in silence, become one of the relatively few experts who keep newsroom telephone numbers in their rolodexes. You will find reporters amazingly willing to listen, to put your number in their rolodexes, to cover your point of view along with all the others. Insofar as you can, try to be a 3 or a 7—that is, a credible exponent of an identifiable viewpoint. Don't let yourself be pushed to a position that's not yours, of course, but recognize that journalism doesn't trust 0's and 10's and has little use for 5's.

Although journalists tend not to believe in Truth-with-a-capital-T, they believe fervently in facts. Never lie to a reporter. Never guess. If you don't know, say you don't know. If you know but can't tell, say you can't tell and explain why.

- *The risk story is usually simplified to a dichotomy*

The media see environmental risk as a dichotomy; either the situation is hazardous or it is safe. This is in part because journalism dichotomizes all issues into sides to be balanced. But there are other reasons for dichotomizing risk. (1) It is difficult to find space for complex, nuanced, intermediate positions in a typical news story, say 40 seconds on television or 15 short paragraphs in a newspaper. (2) Virtually everyone outside his or her own field prefers simplicity to complexity, precision to approximation, and certainty to tentativeness. (3) Most of the "bottom lines" of journalism are dichotomies—the chemical release is either legal or illegal, people either evacuate or stay, the incinerator is either built or not built. Like risk managers, the general public is usually asked to make yes-or-no decisions, and journalists are not wrong to want to offer information in that form.

If you want to fight the journalistic tendency to dichotomize, fight it explicitly, asserting that the issue is not "risky or not" but "how risky." Recognizing that intermediate positions on risk are intrinsically less dramatic and more com-

plex than extreme positions, work especially hard to come up with simple, clear, interesting ways to express the middle view. Even so, expect reporters to insist on knowing "which side" you come down on with respect to the underlying policy dichotomy.

- *Reporters try to personalize the risk story*

Perhaps nothing about media coverage of environmental risk so irritates technical sources as the media's tendency to personalize. "Have you stopped drinking it yourself?" "Would you let your family live there?" Such questions fly in the face of the source's technical training to keep oneself out of one's research, and they confuse the evidentiary requirements of policy decisions with the looser ones of personal choices. But for reporters, questions that personalize are the best questions. They do what their editors are constantly asking reporters to do: bring dead issues to life, make the abstract concrete, and focus on real people facing real decisions.

Knowing that reporters will inevitably ask personalizing questions, be prepared with answers. It is often possible to answer with both one's personal views and one's policy recommendations, and then to explain the difference if there is one. Or come with colleagues whose personal views are different, thus dramatizing the uncertainty of the data. If you are not willing (or not permitted) to acknowledge your own views, plan out some other way to personalize the risk, such as anecdotes, metaphors, or specific advice for readers and viewers on the individual micro-risk level.

- *Claims of risk are usually more newsworthy than claims of safety*

On our 0-10 scale of risk assertions, the 3's and 7's share the bulk of the coverage, but they don't share it equally. Risk assertions receive considerably more media attention than risk denials. Sometimes, in fact, the denials get even less coverage than the intermediate position, and reporters wind up "balancing" strong assertions of risk with bland statements that the degree of risk is unknown. In the New Jersey study, the proportions were 58% risky, 18% not risky, and 24% mixed or intermediate.

This is not bias, at least not as

journalism understands bias. It is built into the concept of newsworthiness. If there were no allegation of risk, there would be no story. That something here might be risky is thus the core of the story; having covered it, the media give rather less attention to the counterbalancing notion that it might not be risky.

Among several factors that make risk more newsworthy than safety, the one closest to outright bias—but still distinguishable in the minds of journalists—is the media's traditional skepticism toward those in authority. Most news is about powerful people, but along with the advantage of access government and industry must endure the disadvantage of suspicion. Environmental groups, by contrast, receive less attention from the media, but the attention is more consistently friendly.

Sociologist Allan Mazur has found that public fearfulness about risky new technologies is proportional to the amount of coverage, not to its character. Media coverage of environmental risk alerts the public to risks it was otherwise unaware of, and thus increases the level of alarm even when coverage is balanced.

This is not a rationale for avoiding the media. Even balanced media coverage may not reliably lead to balanced public opinion, but balanced coverage is preferable to unbalanced coverage. And the coverage is most likely to be balanced when sources on all sides are actively trying to get covered. People with knowledge and opinions to share perform a public service when they share them.

- *Reporters do their jobs with limited expertise and time*

At all but the largest media, reporters covering environmental risk are not likely to have any special preparation for the assignment. Specialized environmental reporters are the exception to the rule. Reporters covering an environmental emergency, for example, are mostly general assignment or police reporters. And reporters tend to be science-phobic in the first place: the typical college journalism major takes only two science courses, and chooses those two carefully to avoid rigor. Though there are many exceptions, the average reporter ap-

proaches a technical story with trepidation (often hidden by professional bravado), expecting not to understand.

It doesn't help that the average reporter covers and writes two or three stories a day. Here too there are exceptions, but most journalists are in a great hurry most of the time. They must make deadline not just on this story, but quite often on the story they will be covering after this one. Their goal, reasonably, is not to find out all that is known, but just to find out enough to write the story.

COMMUNICATE

It may help to train reporters about your field—but it will help a lot more to train *yourself* (and your colleagues and staff) about dealing with the media. Hiring effective public information specialists is also worthwhile, but reporters much prefer to talk to the people in charge. Especially during emergencies, press calls often go the boss and the expert instead of the press office, so the boss and the expert should know how to talk to reporters.

Adequate communication skills are not so hard to develop. All it takes is a little understanding of how the media work, a little training in dealing with reporters, and a little experience to smooth out the rough edges.

Though you may never enjoy your contact with reporters, the risks of ducking the media are far greater than the risks of working with them. Every news story about environmental risk is a collaboration between the journalists working on the story and the sources they talk to. There's not much you can do to change the nature of journalism or the performance of journalists. But you can understand them and figure out how to deal with them. By improving your own performance as a source, you can bring about a real improvement in media coverage of environmental risk.

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